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Shultz's Failure

President Reagan's decision to pull the Marines out of Beirut resulted less from 1984 election year fears than from his worry that Secretary of State George Shultz's failed Lebanon policy threatened new and worse disasters for the United States.

Even so, if Shultz himself had been in Washington over the past weekend, when the withdrawal decision was reached, he might have blocked it. "There would have been at the very least a lot more acrimony," a key Reagan Mideast adviser told us, "and perhaps another costly delay." Shultz's blind clinging to a diseased policy that had long since become terminal now hands Syria the juicy key role that the United States might have played in building a new Lebanon.

Given Reagan's notorious patience with wayward advisers and aversion to hiring a third secretary of state in three years, he will retain Shultz. But although the withdrawal decision shifts Reagan away from new disasters, there is no way to nullify grave harm done to his foreign policy, his credibility and his country's standing in the world by Shultz's blindness.

One measure of that harm was a secret meeting Monday between Saudi Arabian King Fahd and French President Francois Mitterrand in the Elysee Palace. The Saudi monarch was a key but unsuccessful intermediary between the United States and Syrian President Hafez Assad during the long effort by pro-American Arabs to get Shultz to deal with Syria's concern over U.S.-Israeli pressures on Lebanon.

Fahd flew to Paris for a single purpose: to convince Mitterrand that if America's European allies failed to persuade the United States to play an evenhanded role between Israel and the Arabs, Western influence in the Arab world was doomed to be overshadowed sooner or later by the Soviet Union.

King Hussein of Jordan, due here to see Reagan next week, has expressed similar worries privately to U.S. officials. Shultz's insistence that Lebanon's hapless president, Amin Gemayel, swallow the May 17 Israeli-Lebanon troop withdrawal agreement increased these Arab fears. It warned pro-American Arabs that a future Israeli invasion of, for instance, Jordan, like the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, could bring similar U.S. pressures on Hussein to sign humiliating terms as the price of Israeli withdrawal.

For Shultz the tragedy of failure is deep and personal. The collapse of Gemayel's government was indirectly caused by his addiction to the one-sided May 17 agreement. Yet, with the exception of a few pro-Israeli Foggy Bottom fantasizers, it was universally perceived as the wrecker of Shultz's hopes for a new U.S.-backed, Israeli-sponsored Lebanese regime.

The collapse of Gemayel's government has now imposed a death sentence on the May 17 agreement. But when a high official of a trusted U.S. ally spent nearly two hours last December warning Shultz the agreement would explode in the West's face, Shultz gave no ground.

As leader of the Western alliance, the United States is uniquely immune to pressures from its partners. The Lebanon debacle may make it less so.

Strangely, the perception of American influence declining in the ashes of Lebanon is better understood in the Pentagon and the cloak-and-dagger brigades of the CIA than in Shultz's State Department. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, CIA Director William Casey and, before he joined the Cabinet, former national security adviser William Clark understood how the Arabs would read Shultz's 1983 demand for a pro-Israel Lebanese government: as implicit U.S. support for Israel's 1982 invasion.

But the bitter fruits of Israel's invasion of Lebanon and Shultz's flawed policy ever since have not yet all been gathered. The buildup of Soviet power in Syria continues far beyond

its previous peak; Syria rides ever higher on the humiliation of the United States; internal political turbulence immobilizes Israel; the United States risks more Islamic wrath by killing Moslems when necessary to suppress rebel fire in Beirut.

Still to count is the political cost at home for Ronald Reagan's high-flying reelection campaign. The one-in-10 chance that Gemayel will somehow be preserved following his surrender to Damascus might contain the cost somewhat. At best, however, American influence will be reduced to a veneer, showing Reagan a big loser in the superpower game and blackening his foreign policy record. That is just what Reagan's advisers feared and privately predicted—all of them, that is, except those on the seventh floor of the State Department.

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